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# Negotiating the dilemmas of claiming asylum: A discursive analysis of interviews with refugees on life in Scotland

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## **Introduction**

Refugees and asylum seekers may find themselves in a dilemma in their countries of asylum. Despite potentially being subject to harsh aspects of the asylum system, such as detention, it may be difficult for them to voice criticism without risking being treated as self-interested or ungrateful by members of the host society. For instance, ‘complaints’, such as accusations of racism, could be taken by members of the host society as undermining the severity of the persecution they fled. How then do refugees and asylum seekers negotiate these dilemmas in host societies such as Scotland?

The concept of ‘ideological dilemmas’, developed by Billig et al. (1988), is particularly relevant to issues around the presence of asylum seekers and refugees. Rather than approaching ideology as having only formal and essential structures, they conceived of ideologies as being dilemmatic in character – that is, having an element of tension that is worked through via argument. For example, humanitarianism is a particularly relevant ideology in relation to support for asylum seekers and involves tension between the elements of ‘costs to self’ and ‘duty to others’ (Every 2008). These dilemmas are worked through in public debate on the issue of asylum and it is of particular interest how asylum seekers and refugees themselves negotiate similar dilemmas.

Some research (e.g., Every & Augoustinos 2007; Goodman 2008; Lynn & Lea 2003) has focused on public discourse to investigate how asylum seekers and refugees are constructed in ways that challenge or legitimise their presence in host countries. In particular, this research has found that within public discourse, asylum seekers are often portrayed as ‘bogus’ and presented as seeking asylum for economic reasons rather than because they are fleeing persecution (Capdevila & Callaghan 2008; Every & Augoustinos 2007). Moreover, asylum seekers and refugees are often portrayed in ways that dehumanise them, and are associated with criminality, illness, and dependency (Goodman 2008; Lynn & Lea 2003). These linguistic constructions are supported by policies that similarly position asylum seekers in these ways (Squire 2009), such as through the use of detention (Malloch & Stanley 2005) and preventing them from working (Smyth & Kum 2010). Some research has also looked at how the discourse of refugee advocates justifies the presence of asylum seekers and refugees, such as through portraying refugees as being compelled to flee from persecution and therefore as deserving of protection, or through construing the provision of refuge as consonant with the image of the nation (Every & Augoustinos 2008a, 2008b).

This research has been important for illustrating how the issue is publicly debated by elites. However, as yet there has been little research that has analysed how asylum seekers and refugees actually talk about their experiences, despite some researchers arguing that it is important to give refugees a ‘voice’ (e.g., Goodman & Speer 2007). For instance, Verkuyten (2005b) has argued that it is important to analyse how minority group members such as asylum seekers and refugees talk about racism and discrimination, as there

may be important similarities between their discourse and the discourse of majority group members. Some discursive research has focused on how issues of racism are discussed in the context of debates relating to asylum, including among politicians (Every & Augoustinos 2007) and students (Goodman & Burke 2010), but very little has focused on how asylum seekers themselves talk about racism.

In this regard, Leudar et al. (2008) undertook interviews with refugees in the UK to compare their discourse with the ways refugees were portrayed in the media. They noted that the biographical narratives appeared to be oriented to contesting the hostile themes in media discourse. For example, they portrayed themselves as willing to work rather than idle and as having fled persecution rather than coming to the UK for economic reasons. Interestingly, one of the interviewees talked about how she actually started to feel ‘bogus’ and about how she imagined she had come to the UK for economic reasons (p.212). This suggests that refugee discourse may be oriented to wider hostile themes, both in terms of challenging negative constructions and actually drawing on these negative constructions at times.

Similarly, Colic-Peisker (2005) undertook research on the ways in which refugees talk about their experiences in the host society. From interviews with Bosnian refugees in Australia, she found that they tended to associate themselves more with white Australians than with non-European refugees. The interviewees suggested that their ‘whiteness’ helped them to integrate into the local community, as they had a form of ‘invisibility’, and tended to deny experiencing discrimination. The author suggested that this allowed them to claim ‘insider status’ and may be a way of avoiding the negative

connotations associated with being a refugee. This therefore illustrates another way in which refugees may attempt to manage the 'hostile themes' found in public discourse (Leudar et al. 2008).

The present study seeks to build on this previous research on refugee discourse by looking in more detail at how asylum seekers and refugees talk about their experiences, the social functions that these may fulfil, and how their talk manages the dilemmas in which they find themselves. More specifically, this study focuses on how asylum seekers discuss issues relating to potentially negative experiences in the host country, including racism and exclusionary aspects of the asylum process.

## **Methodology**

I undertook semi-structured qualitative interviews in 2010/11 in English with 15 adult asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow (ten men and five women) regarding their experiences in the UK. They were from 11 different countries across Africa and the Middle East, and had been living in the UK for an average of six years. Seven interviewees had some form of leave to remain and the remaining eight either had an active asylum claim or had had their claim refused. They were recruited through three different integration networks and interviews took place on the organisations' premises. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews were 33 minutes long on average and all but two interviewees agreed to be audio recorded. Participation was voluntary and confidential and participants received £10 for taking part.

The data was transcribed and analysed using discourse analytic techniques, which treats language as actively constructing reality rather than simply representing reality (Potter & Wetherell 1987;

McKinlay & McVittie 2008). In particular, this approach involves analysing discourse in terms of the social functions it performs, such as the way that particular narrative structures, rhetorical devices, uses of categories and ways of describing serve particular ends by justifying or criticising certain actions or states of affairs (Potter & Wetherell 1987). For instance, Edwards & Potter (1992) illustrated that speakers may present an evaluation as factual, rather than being a subjective assessment, by presenting it as counter to their own stake or interest in the issue. Following previous examples (e.g., Every & Augoustinos 2007; Goodman 2008), the analysis focuses on the ways that speakers construct asylum seekers, refugees, and other relevant actors, and the extent to which this functions to justify the presence of asylum seekers in the host society or to criticise harsh asylum policies. Following the conventions of discourse analysis, specific extracts are presented and analysed in detail (Potter & Wetherell 1987; McKinlay & McVittie 2008). These extracts should be treated as illustrative rather than representative.

The analysis also draws on the work of Billig et al. (1988) regarding the way that people negotiate dilemmas through discourse. For instance, Billig et al. illustrated that opposition to the rights of ethnic minority groups risks positioning the speaker as prejudiced, and therefore people may deal with this dilemma by portraying such rights as ‘special privileges’ and thus position themselves in favour of equality (p.120). Similarly, it may be that asylum seekers risk seeming ungrateful or overly sensitive if they criticise the host society or make accusations of racism. The analysis therefore examines the ways in which asylum seekers manage these potential dilemmas.

Please note the use of the following transcription conventions:

(.)	Very short pause
(2.0)	Length of pause in seconds
th-	Broken off speech
u::h	Stretched sound
(word?)	Unclear word
INT	Interviewer
R3	Refugee interviewee 3

## Analysis

The analysis focuses on extracts from interviews from five of the participants in order to illustrate in detail the ways in which they talked about some of their potentially negative experiences in the host society and the ways they managed related dilemmas. The first extract relates to a general interview question about difficulties in the host society, whereas the second addresses the more specific issue of violence and the third explicitly deals with racism. The final two extracts address issues related to harsh aspects of the asylum process, as the fourth extract relates to the use of detention and the fifth addressed the legislative barriers to asylum seekers' right to work. This first extract was chosen as it deals with the general issue of asylum seekers discussing difficulties they face and the justification of their presence in the host society.

### *Extract 1*

- 1 INT what would you say that you've found most difficult
- 2 since being in the UK?
- 3 R3 (2.0) u::h (.) believe me I do not feel any difficulties
- 4 in UK
- 5 INT okay
- 6 R3 (.) and that's uh (.) people sorta think about that (.)
- 7 that uh we have lot of difficulties here (1.0) but I



- 8            think (1.2) when I was in [country of origin] I have a  
 9            lot of problems, I told you about this  
 10    INT    right, mm-hmm  
 11    R3    (.) I came here (.) I told you before I feel relaxed  
 12    INT    mm-hmm  
 13    R3    (.) and then I put c- claim that (1.2) when you put  
 14           the claim (1.2) why you put the claim? (1.2) because  
 15           you have problem in my- our country  
 16    INT    yeah  
 17    R3    (.) if have in your country problem (.) that's why you  
 18           get claim here, after that (1.2) I don't think so I get  
 19           any difficulties

Several of the interviewees stated that they had no or few difficulties, and yet would often state problems they faced in other parts of the interview. Van den Berg (2003) suggested that such contradiction may arise when speakers are involved in face-saving activities or when negotiating ideological dilemmas (Billig et al. 1988). In this instance, claiming not to face any difficulties may signal that the interviewee is negotiating the dilemma of being critical of the host society while avoiding seeming ungrateful, and/or the way that discussing problems in the host society may undermine the credibility of their claims to have faced persecution in their country of origin.

The interviewee uses a narrative contrast to suggest he has no problems in the UK: ‘when I was in [country of origin] I have a lot of problems [...] I came here [...] I feel relaxed’ (ll. 8-11). As suggested by Van den Berg (2003), an apparent contradiction may be resolved through different constructions of concepts; in this case, difficulties are equated with ‘a lot of problems’ which is likened to the situation in his country of origin. This construction highlights the problems in his homeland, which emphasises his need to be in

the UK and the legitimacy of his asylum claim, while construing any issues he confronts in the UK as being relatively unproblematic in contrast. If the difficulties in the UK were presented as such, it may undermine the seriousness of his asylum claim, or even suggest that if the problems in the UK are so bad then he should return to his country of origin. The logic of this argument is explicated in lines 13–19: the reason someone puts in an asylum claim is that they have problems in their own country; if they have problems in their own country and they are now in the UK then they can no longer have any problems. The implication is that if someone has problems in the UK then they must not have really had problems in their own country. This point is made by the rhetorical question in line 14: ‘why you put the claim?’ The phrasing suggests that it is addressed to an asylum seeker, and the obvious answer – ‘because you have problem in my- our country’ (ll. 14–15) – implies that, by logical extension, any legitimate asylum claim would deny the possibility of someone experiencing problems in the UK.

Therefore the claim by interviewees that they do not experience difficulties in the UK – and any obvious contradictions this may create through contrast with other statements within the interview regarding their problems – can be understood as evidencing a dilemma (Billig et al. 1988) in terms of citing difficulties in the UK while maintaining a credible case for needing to be in the country. The analysis of this extract demonstrates that interviewees may deal with this dilemma by contrasting the situation in their country of origin with the UK, resulting in their previous problems constituting real difficulties and any current issues ceasing to be problems.

The next extract builds upon these findings by focusing on an

instance where the interviewee was subject to specific and severe problems in the host society. That is, the interviewee was the victim of violence that left lasting physical damage. The extract comes from a point in the interview after the interviewee spoke about losing several of his teeth due to being attacked in Glasgow.

*Extract 2*

- 1 R9 always no matter what happens to me
- 2 INT mmm
- 3 R9 (0.5) I look on the bright side
- 4 INT mmm
- 5 R9 yeah because I mean at least I'm alive (.)
- 6 INT mmm
- 7 R9 and (.) as also (.) uh if I look on the (1.0) the th-
- 8 (0.5) the best (0.6) bright side (0.8) that's (.) I mean
- 9 in the war (0.6) in [country of origin] (.) I've been
- 10 through (1.2) and people were dying on my hands
- 11 (.)
- 12 INT yeah
- 13 R9 people I know, people I don't know, people (.) just
- 14 next to me, people that don't (press for?) me (.) so
- 15 (.) I've seen a lot (.) my own family, most of them
- 16 they got [killed] (0.8)
- 17 INT jeez yeah
- 18 R9 so at least also one other thing I'm happy is I'm alive
- 19 (.)
- 20 INT yeah
- 21 R9 so today (0.8) no matter what happened to me,
- 22 INT mmm
- 23 R9 in in here or in [country of origin] or
- 24 INT mmm
- 25 R9 in [country of origin] (0.8) or whatever happened (.)
- 26 to my teeth
- 27 INT mm-hmm
- 28 R9 (.) I say this this this and recover it back (.)
- 29 INT mmm
- 30 R9 I can recover from this (.)
- 31 INT yeah
- 32 R9 and every uh t- the way I look at today is every day

- 33 I wake up is a beautiful day for me  
 34 INT right yeah  
 35 R9 (.) yeah so (0.6) so no matter what (.)  
 36 INT yeah  
 37 R9 and nobody, no matter what they do to me (.)  
 38 INT yeah  
 39 R9 can stop what I'm doing

Stating ‘always no matter what happens to me (0.5) I look on the bright side’ (ll. 1–3) positions the interviewee as playing an active role in evaluating his life circumstances. Although he may not have control over ‘what happens’ to him, he presents himself as being in control over how he views the things that have happened, and as therefore being able to view his life positively. In particular, this view is worked up through the contrast of ‘at least I'm alive’ (l. 5) and his account of life threatening events in his country of origin. The horror and danger of the events he lived through are worked up through vivid descriptions of death that are next to him: ‘people were dying on my hands [...] people (.) just next to me’ (ll. 10–14). Furthermore, the indiscriminate nature of the killing is construed by the list of those who were killed, which is made out to include anyone: ‘people I know, I people I don't know’ (l. 13). In lines 115–16, mentioning that most of his ‘own family’ were killed not only conveys the great loss he has suffered but also reinforces the idea that he was in a place of danger, as he is presented as a potential victim if ‘most’ of his own family were killed. It is worth noting that the interviewee does not actually say that his family were killed in line 16, but rather, this was conveyed to the interviewer through inexplicit non-verbal communication, and its meaning was understood through the context of talking about death and the contrast with the interviewee being ‘happy’ to be ‘alive’ (ll. 18–19).

Not directly mentioning the word ‘killed’ both gives the impression that what happened was so horrible that it is difficult to even state exactly what happened as well as drawing the interviewer in to fill in the events with their own assumptions, making them an active participant and co-producer of the narrative.

In a similar way to the previous extract, the contrast between the events in his country of origin and being happy in Glasgow adds legitimacy to his need for asylum. The implication is that if someone can suffer a violent attack and still be positive, the situation they fled must be severe. This provides some insight into the dilemma which refugees and asylum seekers face in the UK: no matter how bad their situation here, ‘complaining’ may suggest that the situation they fled was not sufficiently bad to warrant asylum. Furthermore, by positioning himself as being ‘happy [to be] alive’ (l. 18–19), it provides a sense of agency and control in the face of seemingly uncontrollable events, allowing him to be positive despite the violence that has occurred both in his country of origin and his host society.

The next extract similarly deals with antagonism from the host society, and builds on the previous analyses by addressing a particularly sensitive issue: racism. As argued by Augoustinos & Every (2010), making accusations of racism can reflect badly on the speaker, making this a difficult dilemma to manage.

### *Extract 3*

- 1 R10 there's some people who are (0.8) no trouble at all,
- 2       there will be no problems
- 3 INT yeah
- 4 R10 (.) with (.) asylum seekers

- 5 INT yeah
- 6 R10 (.) mm (1.0) you will tell them oh I'm an asylum  
7 seeker (0.8) they're happy that you're here heh
- 8 INT sure yeah
- 9 R10 (.) yeah (.) but there's other people again (2.2) they're  
10 not happy (.) eh (1.5) it's em (1.0) like those who are  
11 happy (.) who are not happy (.) about it, they just see  
12 you (1.0) as a person (.) who has  
13 probably come over to take something out of the  
14 country
- 15 INT yeah
- 16 R10 but everyday you don't take anything you know heh
- 17 INT right yeah
- 18 R10 (.) mm but that's the way they they see you
- 19 INT mmm
- 20 R10 as maybe someone's (come to go a?) job or get the  
21 benefits or things like that you know
- 22 INT yeah
- 23 R10 mm (1.0) and that's (.) the negative (1.0) thing that  
24 most of the some- some or a few (.) people in society  
25 have towards the
- 26 INT yeah
- 27 R10 asylum seekers (1.2) mm (1.0) I know most of it's it's  
28 not- it's got nothing to do with your (0.8) colour or  
29 y-
- 30 INT oh okay
- 31 R10 mm
- 32 INT right
- 33 R10 it's just a minority those who just think that (1.6) you  
34 just coming in to get a job or things like that heh

The interviewee divides the local community into two groups of people: those who are 'happy that you're there' and those who are 'not happy' (ll. 7-10). The perspective of those who are 'not happy' is described in further detail in lines 12-14: 'they just see you (1.0) as a person (.) who has probably come over to take something out of the country'. The use of 'just' implies that this perspective is limited; it does not take account of the full picture. The unhappiness is then

associated with a view that asylum seekers are taking things from the country. When this is challenged ('but' l. 16), rather than it being suggested that it is not right to think this, it is suggested that it is wrong because the asylum seekers 'don't take anything' (l. 16).

This is continued further in lines 18–21, as it is suggested that people see asylum seekers as taking jobs or benefits. The interviewee then orientates to the suggestion that the negative views of some locals may be due to racism, as he says that 'I know most of it's it's not- it's got nothing to do with your (0.8) colour' (ll. 27–29). Producing this clarification at this point suggests that he is managing a dilemma in the sense that he is making a negative evaluation of some elements of the local society, but hedging this claim in a way that reduces its seriousness. The construction implies that the negative views are caused by the false perception that asylum seekers are getting resources unfairly, rather than being due to inherent racism, and is therefore amenable to change (i.e., through realising the 'truth' that asylum seekers are not in the UK to 'take' things). Moreover, by stating that it is 'just a minority' who hold the negative attitudes, this avoids making a negative evaluation of the local community in general. This is in line with previous discourse research that has suggested making claims about racism is delicate and can have negative consequences for the speaker (Augoustinos & Every 2010; Goodman & Burke 2010). In this case, asylum seekers may have to manage the dilemma of referring to experiences or attitudes that could be understood as racist without making negative assessments of the whole local community, which could themselves be seen as prejudiced or over sensitive.

Similar to the findings of Verkuyten (2005a) regarding minority talk about racism, minimising the extent of racism

emphasises the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees have personal responsibility and scope for control over their lives, while also highlighting the potential for social progress. As illustrated by Colic-Peisker (2005), by denying being victims of discrimination, asylum seekers and refugees legitimise their presence in the host society. The arguments and constructions put forth by the interviewee therefore manage this dilemma by associating the problem with distorted perceptions among a minority of the local community, explicitly denying the existence of racism.

The three extracts analysed above have related to general difficulties in the host society and to antagonism from the local community. However, another important aspect of the experience of asylum seekers relates to the asylum system itself. The next extract therefore deals with a particularly harsh aspect of the asylum system: detention. This practice may involve people being arrested and placed in a prison-like environment for long periods of time (Malloch & Stanley 2005). The analysis illustrates how an asylum seeker may provide an account that is critical of this practice without seeming ungrateful for the provision of refuge.

#### *Extract 4*

- |    |     |                                                          |
|----|-----|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | R5  | I think the (0.6) government (.) should (.) think about  |
| 2  |     | their (1.4) their (0.6) policy (.) in this country (2.0) |
| 3  | INT | mm-hmm                                                   |
| 4  | R5  | see (1.0) I when I go (1.8) for example to Home          |
| 5  |     | Office (1.0) I you know (1.2) hhh heh (.) this I I       |
| 6  |     | remember something (.) I think (1.2) you should (1.2)    |
| 7  |     | know about this (1.6) during three and a half years      |
| 8  |     | (1.6) I was living in Scotland                           |
| 9  | INT | mm-hmm                                                   |
| 10 | R5  | (0.8) they arrested me four times                        |
| 11 | INT | yeah                                                     |



12 R5 (1.0) they took me to Dungavel time- House (0.6)  
 13 two times, twice  
 14 INT okay  
 15 R5 they took me to Manchester detention (0.5) different  
 16 detention in Manchester  
 17 INT mmm  
 18 R5 (1.2) they took me to (0.7) Oxford detention, they  
 19 took me to (0.5) Heathrow (0.5) detention (1.0) four  
 20 times you know  
 21 INT mmm  
 22 R5 (1.0) without any reason (0.8)  
 23 INT yeah  
 24 R5 all even I ask them okay well (0.8) why- why did you  
 25 a- arrest me  
 26 INT yeah  
 27 R5 with hands cuffed they  
 28 INT yeah  
 29 R5 came to my flat  
 30 INT yeah  
 31 R5 in the morning (0.6) they put the hands cuff  
 32 INT yeah  
 33 R5 (.) this is not nice you know  
 34 INT yeah  
 35 R5 (1.2) and took me to Manchester (.) finally to- (1.0)  
 36 half an hour before aeroplane (0.6) m- going in (0.5)  
 37 into the aeroplane (1.0) my solicitor contact me (.)  
 38 and said [interviewee's name] okay you are free you  
 39 can come back again  
 40 INT hhh  
 41 R5 (0.6) and this is very strange (.) they (.) I told (1.0)  
 42 about this situation to (0.8) many people  
 43 INT mmm  
 44 R5 but I don't know (0.6) they cannot understand (.)  
 45 INT right  
 46 R5 (1.0) they are spend (1.0) for example a ticket from  
 47 London to here (1.2) one hundred twenty six pound  
 48 INT yeah  
 49 R5 for nothing  
 50 INT right yeah (.) mmm  
 51 R5 (0.8) and I told them (.) they said s::s (.) be quiet (2.0)  
 52 INT heh heh the Home Office told you that  
 53 R5 yeah

- 54 INT right  
 55 R5 one of the officer you just be quiet [interviewee's  
 56 name] (.)  
 57 INT yeah  
 58 R5 (.) don't talk  
 59 INT right  
 60 R5 (2.0) um none of your business  
 61 INT yeah  
 62 R5 just you go back to (1.0) Glasgow (1.2) I want to tell  
 63 them that they  
 64 INT yeah  
 65 R5 have spent (.) too much money for nothing  
 66 INT right  
 67 R5 and all the time they say (0.8) we have problem with  
 68 the money  
 69 INT hhh  
 70 R5 we should cut this cut that that

Stating 'I think the (0.6) government (.) should (.) think about their (1.4) their (0.6) policy (.) in this country' (ll. 1-2) frames the narrative that follows as being a critique of the UK government and their asylum policies. Furthermore, stating 'they arrested me four times' (l. 10) can be heard as implying that this is a large number of times, particularly due to the negative connotations of 'arrested' that are associated with criminality and loss of freedom, and the fact that it is repeated for emphasis: 'four times you know' (ll. 19-20). The intrusiveness and repetitiveness of the arrests is emphasised by listing the various detention centres that the interviewee was taken to and the description of being arrested: 'they came to my flat in the morning (0.6) they put the hands cuff' (ll. 29-31). The actions of the government are criticised when the interviewee states that the arrests were 'without any reason' (l. 22). Due to the associations between arrests and justice, arrests without reason can be understood as unjust and therefore unacceptable. The irrationality inherent in these

actions is worked up by the interviewee by describing it as ‘very strange’ (l. 41). Furthermore, saying ‘I told (1.0) about this situation to (0.8) many people but I don't know (0.6) they cannot understand’ (ll. 41–44) implies that it is not only from his perspective that this is strange, but that his assessment is shared by a number of other people. Overall, this has the effect of criticising the government on the grounds that their actions have been intrusive, unjustified and irrational.

The government is further criticised through portraying their actions as being against the country's own economic interests. For example, the interviewee states: ‘they are spend (1.0) for example a ticket from London to here (1.2) one hundred twenty six pound for nothing’ (ll. 46–49). This involves the use of an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986), ‘nothing’, that suggests the money was spent for no purpose and was therefore a waste. Moreover, the interviewee is positioned as being concerned with the way that government is wasting money on these arrests, both in terms of the way in which it appears to be hypocritical and in terms of the economic waste: ‘I want to tell them that they have spent (.) too much money for nothing and all the time they say (0.8) we have problem with the money we should cut this cut that that’ (ll. 62–70). This is contrasted with the government's portrayed lack of concern, as they simply tell him to be quiet when he raises this issue (ll. 51 & 55–58). In this way the use of detention and arrests is criticised, not simply because of the negative impact they have on the interviewee, but rather in the interests of the nation (Reicher & Hopkins 2001), particularly in terms of economic impact. This therefore presents the argument as rational and as one that should be supported by everyone in the UK. Overall, the detailed narrative could be seen as

orientating to the difficulty of criticising the government when they have provided a place of refuge. The criticisms are built up by the way in which the experiences are described and the rationale for change is based on the national interests rather than the interviewee's personal feelings.

The final extract describes a different exclusionary aspect of the asylum system: the prevention of asylum seekers from engaging in paid employment. This analysis illustrates how an asylum seeker can argue for the expansion of asylum seekers' rights while portraying the issue as not being about self interest.

*Extract 5*

- 1 INT what else do you think could be done to better help (.)
- 2 asylum seekers and refugees?
- 3 R1 (1.0) I will tell you Sir (.) I said (.) in my opinion (1.0)
- 4 they have to give the chance to people (1.0) to start
- 5 doing their work in here (.)
- 6 INT okay
- 7 R1 (.) u:h (1.0) they give them the opportunity to get
- 8 their work permit (1.0) and then (0.8) they give them
- 9 the places to work
- 10 INT right
- 11 R1 (.) and they will started you know to see (.) the people
- 12 how they (0.8) uh how can I say they (0.8) behave
- 13 (1.0) themselves like that
- 14 INT right
- 15 R1 (.) if (0.5) there is some people they don't want you
- 16 know to work (.) just why you are living here? just get
- 17 back (.)
- 18 INT okay
- 19 R1 (1.2) because you know that it's not fair to live you
- 20 know without do anything for example I will tell you
- 21 there is some people they are abuse of the system
- 22 INT okay
- 23 R1 (1.0) they try to abuse of the system (.) we know (0.8)
- 24 uh that (0.8) we can do something (.) we can do

- 25 something (0.8) we try (1.2) do your best you know to  
 26 do to give something (1.6) uh even if you can't you  
 27 know (.) for example it's you know you are not  
 28 disabled, if you are not disabled why you not (.)  
 29 INT right  
 30 R1 (0.8) to do something?  
 31 INT mm-hmm  
 32 R1 (1.0) you have to understand you know these people  
 33 here they are working hard (1.0) to build their country  
 34 INT mm-hmm  
 35 R1 (1.2) and to get things you know they have to do a lot  
 36 of things you know (.) to get these thing  
 37 INT right  
 38 R1 (.) so for that reason for us it will be the same (1.0) we  
 39 have to do the same things

In this extract, the interviewee argues that asylum seekers should be given the opportunity to work because this will allow 'them' to see how 'they behave themselves like that' (ll. 3-13). Although ambiguous, the statement suggests that in allowing asylum seekers to work, asylum seekers will be found to 'behave themselves' by working well, and/or the way that asylum seekers behave will reveal useful information about their disposition. Here, the following statement is of particular interest: 'if (0.5) there is some people they don't want you know to work (.) just why you are living here? just get back' (ll. 15-17). This is interesting because very similar statements were made in other interviews but attributed to *locals* who had negative views of asylum seekers. For instance, one interviewee reported that a local person said to her: 'you must come back in your country, why you is come here?' As with the other examples, the rhetorical question contains two elements that are somewhat in tension: it both suggests that there is no good reason for the person's being in the country and that the speaker does not have knowledge

of the reasons for their being there. When this is stated as being the voice of a local person, the implication is that they are not aware of the persecution that asylum seekers are forced to flee or the legal and moral obligations of the UK to provide asylum; here, when voiced by an asylum seeker, this aspect would seem to be absent, as an asylum seeker would be assumed to have an understanding of these issues. The use of the rhetorical question therefore suggests that persecution in itself is not a good enough reason for someone to be in the UK claiming asylum, but rather they need also to be contributing to society through work.

The follow-up ‘just get back’ (ll. 16–17) suggests that asylum seekers can easily return (‘just’ return), which similarly ignores the reasons for them having to flee in the first place. This type of reported speech can be heard as a form of racism or ignorance when associated with local people. However, when voiced by an asylum seeker this takes on a slightly different role: it suggests a hard line on those who are unwilling to contribute to the UK, suggesting that the speaker places importance on this form of contribution, while also making a strong case for allowing asylum seekers to work, as it would purportedly bring attention to those asylum seekers who are unwilling to contribute and can therefore be assumed to be in the country illegitimately. However, it also implies that the right to asylum includes a requirement for people to contribute to the host society, an argument that is potentially damaging to the humanitarian grounds for the provision of asylum.

This argument draws on the concept of fairness: ‘it’s not fair to live you know without do anything’ (ll. 19–20). This suggests that there is a transactional element to the provision of asylum: if someone gets asylum then they must also contribute to the country

of asylum. This is interesting, as this is an argument in favour of the rights of asylum seekers (i.e., the right to work) but it draws on individualistic notions of contribution and payback rather than broader notions of international legal and moral obligations. The interviewee's case is made further by highlighting that some people 'abuse [...] the system' (l. 21). Whereas this could be read as a form of racism, whereby attention is brought to fraudulent cases in order to justify tighter restrictions on the asylum system, here it functions to bolster the interviewee's own case – i.e., they are legitimate whereas others may be illegitimate – and appeal to greater rights to asylum seekers, through drawing on what might otherwise be considered conservative or right-wing discourse. The argument draws on notions of national interest to make the case both for the right and the obligation for asylum seekers to work: 'you have to understand you know these people here they are working hard (1.0) to build their country [...] we have to do the same things' (ll. 32-39). This extract is particularly interesting because it draws on notions that are often used to argue against the presence of asylum seekers and refugees (e.g., Lynn & Lea 2003) but in this case argues for the extension of asylum seeker rights.

## **Discussion**

This article has sought to investigate how refugees and asylum seekers negotiate various dilemmas in which they find themselves in a country of asylum through a close analysis of interview talk about their experiences and views. In particular, the analysis has illustrated how the way in which refugees and asylum seekers talk is oriented to managing these dilemmas sensitively and achieving a range of social actions that relate to justifying their presence in the host society,

criticising negative aspects of the asylum system and creating a sense of agency on their part. However, these constructions also highlight issues such as the sensitivities of asylum seekers talking about problems they may face in the host society, difficulties in challenging racism, and discourse that implies the right to asylum involves an obligation to work.

As pointed out by Van den Berg (2003), contradiction within interview discourse may signal that interviewees are managing ideological dilemmas (Billig 1988) and issues of self-presentation. In the interview extracts, the apparent contradictions between stating that the interviewees had no difficulties and the difficulties that they talked about could be understood as a way of making the persecution they faced appear real, therefore justifying their presence in the UK. Colic-Peisker (2005) suggested that the denial of discrimination helped construct refugees as ‘insiders’ and therefore justified their presence in the host country. An alternative interpretation is that it is difficult for refugees to ‘complain’ about issues in the host country – perhaps particularly those that relate to discrimination – without appearing to undermine the severity of the persecution they faced and therefore undermining their claims for asylum. Taking the social functions of discourse seriously means that the way that refugees and asylum seekers talk about their experiences (and the way that all people talk, for that matter) cannot be taken as neutral representation – e.g., the non-existence of difficulties – due to the complex issues of managing stake and interest. As argued by Potter & Hepburn (2005), accounts provided by interviewees may fulfil a range of functions, and should not be taken merely as an accurate account of reality. In this case, interviewees’ accounts may perform functions such as legitimising their presence in the host country or demonstrating



appreciation of their access to asylum, as well as offering a version of their experiences.

This issue was also illustrated with regard to the criticism of negative aspects of the asylum system. Analysis of the interviewee extracts suggests that it is difficult for asylum seekers and refugees to criticise the asylum system based purely on their own feelings; rather, the criticisms were developed through the use of detailed narrative that implies the problematic nature of the asylum system (in the case of detention and arrest) and makes improvement of the system, including allowing asylum seekers to work, part of the national interest (see Reicher & Hopkins 2001). However, this was potentially problematic in the case of arguing that asylum seekers who did not work should return to their countries. Specifically, this implied that the provision of asylum involved an obligation on the part of asylum seekers to contribute and if they did not contribute they should not receive asylum, something which goes against a needs-based view of asylum. This particular instance highlighted the role that potentially ‘racist’ discourse may be used not only to exclude or restrict asylum seekers (e.g., Capdevila & Callaghan 2008; Every & Augoustinos 2007), but may also be used as a way to extend the rights of asylum seekers. Interestingly, arguments such as this may have more purchase in wider society given that they draw on broadly accepted notions of the importance of contributing to the national economy (Reicher & Hopkins 2001).

This research also sought to address the lack of research about how members of minority groups – and asylum seekers and refugees in particular – talk about racism. As in the research of Verkuyten (2005a), it was found that asylum seekers and refugees may play down or deny the existence of racism. Furthermore, they may argue that

negative views are only held by a minority of people in the host society, and that when hostility is shown, this may have nothing to do with the colour of one's skin but is rather due to more rational concerns, such as access to employment, and is ultimately related to a lack of knowledge about asylum seekers. As suggested by Verkuyten (2005a), this may act to allow for a sense of personal responsibility and control on the part of the interviewee as well as suggesting the potential for positive social change. It potentially also relates to the inherent difficulties in making accusations of racism and the negative results this may have for the accuser (e.g., Augoustinos & Every 2010). However this also makes it more difficult to identify racism and challenge it where it does exist.

Although only illustrative rather than representative, this analysis has focused on asylum seekers' accounts of their experiences in a host society in order to illustrate the ways they manage the dilemmas in which they find themselves. By paying attention to the social functions of discourse, future research could further explore the views of asylum seekers and refugees, complementing in a much-needed way previous research on elite discourse.

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